DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 974 CE 060 578

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TITLE A Report on the Highlander Folk School.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Board Meeting of the Coalition of Adult Education Organizations (Washington, DC, February 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Adult Education; *Civil Rights; *Community Action; Community Education; *Community Problems; Community Schools; Democratic Values; Educational Development; Educational History; Educational Innovation; Educational Methods; *Folk Schools; Leadership Training; Needs Assessment; *Nontraditional Education; Postsecondary Education; *Unions
IDENTIFIERS *Highlander Folk School TN

ABSTRACT

The Highlander Folk School was founded as an alternative kind of education with no academic admission requirements, no examinations or grades, and no set curriculum. Hard times were caused by lack of funds and the radical nature of its purpose--to help poor people know their rights and stand up for them. As an undergraduate, Myles Horton, its founder, gained two insights that influenced his future--the negative effect of the isolation of knowledge from practice in the development of democratic principle and an interest in unions. After college, Horton went to Denmark to learn about the Folk High School movement. On November 1, 1932, he established his school in Monteagle, Tennessee. The curriculum grew from needs of the county residents. Four main projects were local community development, training union leadership, organizing farm/labor groups, and civil rights. The school's efforts in union leadership training ended when the unions grew powerful. Highlander's next effort in civil rights grew naturally out of union leadership training, for blacks needed help to organize. This phase of the school's work and consequent legal troubles brought the close of the original Highlander School. Highlander then moved to its present site in New Market, Tennessee. Today the Highlander Research and Education Center has the same educational policy to help people take the lead in solving their current problems: establishment of rural health clinics; stopping the dumping of toxic waste, strip mining and absentee landlords; tax reform; and land use reform. (YLB)

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A Report on the Highlander Folk School

by
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Prepared for the Board Meeting of the Coalition of Adult Education Organizations. Spring Meeting 1990

I first became acquainted with the Highlander Folk School about twenty-five years ago when I was Director of Adult Education at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont. The President of Goddard, Dr. Royce Pitkin and Myles Horton of Highlander were very close friends, sharing a progressive and even radical philosophy of adult education, Horton being the more radical of the two. I have been intrigued by the thinking of these two men, and my own work has been influenced by them. While I met Myles Horton at Goddard, I never did really get to know him. However, his son, Thorsten, was a work study student in my office at one time. While I have never been to Highlander, I have helped to support it, and I have taught about it so much, I have a great affinity for that institution.

The material I am going to share with you comes from a number of sources, one of which is the recent publication of The Highlander Folk School: A History of its Major Programs, 1932-1961, by Aimee Isgrig Horton, published as part of a series on "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement" by Carlson Publishing Inc., Brooklyn, New York, 1989. Two other sources are Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander by Frank Adams with Myles Horton, published by John F. Blair, Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1975; and a two-hour interview with Myles Horton made by Bill Moyers for public TV in 1983 on

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the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Highlander.

It is far from insignificant to note that Aimee Horton's book, though completed in 1971, is just now being published. Mrs. Horton, the second wife of Myles Horton, wrote the book as her dissertation at Chicago under the tutelage of Cyril Houle. It is an extremely thorough and careful work, but publishers at the time did not realize its growing significance. However, if publishers did not, students have and it has been one of the most popular dissertations in the University library. In her attempt to report objectively as she chronicled the developments of the school, she has sought to give credit to the many persons, without whose efforts the school could not have succeeded. Therefore, while elucidating the special philosophy and methodology of her husband, she has not indulged in some of the very interesting anecdotal material regarding his personality and all the very challenging events of his life. She has added an introductory chapter, "The Shaping of a Radical Educator," to the original work which is a short biography of her husband. The other two sources provide additional insights into the nature of the man.

Myles Horton died last month, January 19, 1990. I was in Thailand when a small story about him appeared in the Washington Post, and so I am sorry to say, I do not have a copy of that obituary. However, one of our UDC professors, Robert Jordan, who felt Horton deserved better, wrote the letter to the editor of which I have copies for all of you. It seemed to me therefore, that in addition to talking about Aimee Horton's book, I should at this time broaden the subject to include a good bit about

Myles Horton, the man.

It is also serendipitous that last month Rosa Parks was honored so splendidly at the Kennedy Center. You all recall that she was the lady who would not move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and thereby started the bus boycott which was one of the most effective strategies for equal rights for Black people. Rosa Parks, you see, took her civil rights training at workshops at Highlander in the early fifties. She was in her twenties at that time. I have a picture of her at Highlander, taken from Aimee Horton's book, and another as she appeared at the Kennedy Center.

Highlander, founded to be an alternative kind of education outside the main stream, has, nevertheless, had the support of some famous Americans, including among others, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther King, Jr. There never were any academic admissions requirements; there were no grades or exams. Indeed, there was no set curriculum and the roles of the staff varied and changed and developed, according to the needs of those who came to learn; the staff members have always been learners as well. Their work at the school has been more a way of life than a paid position, by necessity as well as principle, since Highlander has never had any significant financial resources and sometimes almost none at all.

The hard times at Highlander have not only been caused by lack of funds. Because of the radical nature of its purpose--to help poor people know their rights and stand up for them, to welcome Black and white people both when this was illegal in

Tennessee, to train leaders to organize unions, to prepare Blacks to register to vote, to build an organizations of farmers--because of all these things, many people were unhappy with the success of Highlander, and they tried to close it down. These people were the mill owners, the police, some Southern governors, and the Ku Klux Klan. The school was often in court on all kinds of trumped-up charges. Their buildings were burned, others were sold at auction by the courts, but still they persisted and the work went on because Myles Horton knew well that you can destroy buildings or padlock them, but "you cannot padlock an idea."

To understand more about Highlander, we need to speak more about Myles Horton himself. From his family and its tradition, Myles inherited a religious outlook, a belief in education and an independent forthrightness and stubborn determination. Poor themselves, his family, nevertheless, helped those, Black and white, who were worse off than they.

As a college student he spent a summer earning money by running a vacation Bible school for the residents of four poor counties. From that experience he saw that the work he did, did not really improve the lives of the people, so he invited the parents to attend discussion meetings about their problems. He called in country agents to tell them such things as how to test their wells for typhoid. The people sang together and shared information and made plans to help each other. At the end of the summer they did not want Horton to leave, but he knew he had to finish college and get out into the world to learn more himself.

One of the experiences that raised his social consciousness happened in 1927 when, as President of the campus chapter of the

YMCA, he was attending a conference in Nashville. There he was not allowed to take a Chinese girl to dinner, or to study in the library with a fellow student who was black. In his undergraduate work, Horton gained two specific insights which had much to do with his future. From John Dewey, he read that the isolation of knowledge from practice has a negative effect in the development of democratic principle; and from a wool manufacturer who denounced unionism in a speech at his college, Horton developed his first real interest in unions.

After college, Horton attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he became fast friends with one of his professors, Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr had just come to New York from the ministry of a church in Detroit which served many disadvantaged people and he shared Horton's interest in founding a school to help the poor. Horton also studied at the University of Chicago where he met Dr. Robert Park, a sociologist well-known for his theory of crisis, conflict and mass movements for social change. He also met Jane Addams at the famous settlement center, "Hull House." He learned how she dealt with the harassment, the threats and the intimidation that came her way because she stood up for women's rights and spoke against war.

While he was in Chicago, a Danish minister encouraged him to go to Denmark to learn about the Folk High School movement. Horton supported himself in Denmark by working as a laborer and as soon as he had learned enough Danish, he started interviewing the people to see just what the Folk High School Movement meant to them. While Horton appreciated the methodology of the school

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with students and faculty sharing household duties, with students entering without admission requirements and the absence of exams or grades, and especially the joy of the community singing, he was not content with the liberal arts approach to learning that had no political action component. He determined that he, too, would endeavor to make the most holistic education possible for his students, but one way they would do this was by mingling with the people and learning social problems first-hand.

On November 1, 1932, Myles Horton established his school in a spacious house made available by a benefactor in Monteagle, Tennessee, along with another man, Don West, who was thinking about trying to start a folk school in the South to help the poor. At this point the biography of Myles Horton and the history of Highlander become one story.

The purpose of the school was

> to assist in creating leadership for democracy. Our services are available to labor, farm, community, religious and civic organizations working toward a democratic goal. The nature of the specific educational program will be determined by the needs of the students. Use of the school by individual organizations will be in accordance with their own policies so long as those policies do not conflict with the purpose of the school.

Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr himself sent out the appeals for the first fund drive, which netted less than $1500. To maintain the school, students and staff alike performed the housekeeping functions. The community provided them wood and shared food from their gardens.

Horton was determined not to begin by teaching from books, and the curriculum was to grow from the needs of the county residents. Students did not study in quiet corners, but

immediately took on community projects. One of the first started a club for girls, another organized a community dramatic club, one went to work on road construction to learn the interest of the local people. One met regularly with miners in a mining camp twenty-five miles away, even though he had to walk a good part of the way. Then the students met together back at Highlander. They shared what they had learned with staff members who discussed such background subjects with them as psychology, cultural geography, revolutionary literature and present social and economic concerns. It was not long before the people of the community, however, wanted books and printed material. They read everything Highlander could provide them. This was the way it started. As it grew the school took on so many projects for so many kinds of groups, no one could list them all. But as noted above, the four main projects were local community development, training union leadership, organizing farm/labor groups, and especially civil rights.

Already in the second class of boarding students, some of whom came from the area around Wilder, Tennessee where labor strife was increasing, the students set out to help the strikers. Wilder was the traditional company town where the coal company controlled the very lives of the workers, making weekly deductions from their paychecks for the very poor housing that was supplied, and for charges at the company store, the only one in town, until there was next to nothing in their paychecks. Finally at the breaking point with hopelessness, despair and hunger, the millworkers went out on strike. The company tried every dirty

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trick to break the strike. Even the Red Cross which was supposed to give food to the hungry gave it to the strikebreakers. Horton himself was arrested for helping the strikers. When he asked what the charge against him was, they said, he came there and got information from the strikers and went back and taught it at this school. He did not deny it. He said,

> We found that a very effective way to help students to understand present social order is to throw them into conflict situations where the real nature of our society is projected in all its ugliness,...But, to be effective, such exposure must be preceded, accompanied by and followed by effective efforts to help the observer appreciate and digest what he has seen. Also the tie-in with the conflict situations and participation in the communal school situation keeps our school from being a detached colony or a utopian venture.

The history of the school's efforts in union leadership training are fascinating and endless. For many years in the thirties and early forties, the school worked very closely with the CIO, sponsoring workshops in the school and in many locations in the South. The effect was that by the time the CIO was ready to run its own workshops, many of the leaders had taken their training at Highlander.

By the end of the Second World War, the unions had become quite powerful and even a little conservative in Horton's view, so the school moved quite naturally into the greatest problem of the South at that time: civil rights, equal rights for all races and no segregation.

This effort grew naturally out of the union leadership training, for Blacks needed help to organize even more than white people, and Horton had always insisted that no matter what the law, Black people would never be turned away from Highlander, but

in the early days few came. In 1944 The United Auto Workers held a workshop that at last was attended by Blacks and whites together, to work on plans for collective bargaining, industrial economics, and organizing cooperative food stores. Horton was only too pleased to say that this was the first time in a Southern school that Blacks and whites studied, worked and played together. It is hard to believe that even in the forties, Black people still suffered from lynchings and every kind of discrimination. Some counties, for instance, would let the Black people come in to do the poorest jobs during the day, but by law, these Black persons must be out of the county by sunset.

There were lessons for white people to be learned, for even people of goodwill and good intention at Highlander had to learn some things about themselves in their efforts to give Black people equal opportunity. They had to learn to listen to the Black people. However, Horton believed that poor or Black, it was all the same. It is essential that people learn to take charge of their own lives. He said, "Nothing will change, until we (the poor, or the Black) change--until we throw off our dependence and act for ourselves." He knew the importance of empowerment before it ever became the buzz word of our times.

Most of all the Black people needed the vote, but literacy qualifications stood in their way. Horton moved out and lived among the people to find their interest and the best way of helping them. In the end he found some among them whom he could train who in turn could train others, never in formal classrooms, but in informal situations--in the corner of a store. The teachers talked in adult terms about the social conditions

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under which they lived. They learned to read and write about such things too. They were motivated to register to vote and learn more about candidates so they could put pressure on them to improve things for Black people.

Blacks and whites from many walks of life came together for the desegregation workshops. Many names are familiar, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Julian Bond, Andrew Young and Stokely Carmichael, just to name a few. We have already spoken of Rosa Parks.

This phase of the school's work brought the close of the original Highlander Folk School. On a series of trumped-up charges, the school was raided by police and innocent persons were put in jail. When the case was finally settled the school was found guilty of being a public nuisance and closed. The state of Tennessee sold the buildings at auction. But Horton had much experience over the years in besting his adversaries, and he did it again by applying for and receiving a new charter to operate the Highlander Research and Education Center in Knoxville, Tennessee, before the guilty verdict was even out. Highlander was able to recoup its losses somewhat by gifts and donations, and eventually in 1972 it moved to a new site in New Market, Tennessee where it is now located.

Today the Highlander Research and Education Center has added some new dimensions--particularly in the field of research and in increased publications. The educational policy remains the same, to help people take the lead in solving their own problems. Current problems involve the establishment of rural health

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clinics, the dumping of toxic waste, strip mining and absentee landlords, tax reform and land use reform.

Not all of Highlander's efforts were successful over the years, but Horton and his colleagues learned from every experience. As Frank Adams says, "Education at Highlander is a synthesis of person, group, time, place, purpose and problem. Words and sentences, spoken or written, tend to order this synthesis and give it logic by making it a sequence, when in fact, it is not and cannot be sequential or logical."